Comments on the Undertaking under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act pertaining to Murals in the Ariel Rios Building

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What is at issue in this undertaking is not only the fate of half a dozen murals in the Ariel Rios building, also at stake is the GSA's commitment to its role as custodian of historic public art and to its legal duty to protect the integrity of one of the earliest of the New Deal art programs. The murals constitute a collection of artwork designed for specific places in a building that, with the murals, has been designated as an historic property and is therefore accorded specific protections. The 25 murals and the building itself were intended to be regarded as an integrated whole. Hence, the removal or concealment of even one of the murals inevitably imposes an adverse impact upon the other murals collectively as well as upon the building itself. And removal or concealment of any of these murals with equal inevitability sets a precedent that will encourage others who feel themselves unfavorably "stereotyped" to demand the further dismantling of the Ariel Rios artwork or of any New Deal art anywhere.

It is true, nonetheless, that tastes change and that public art and taste in one era are often at variance with public art and taste in a different era. Public art is of course not sacrosanct or beyond criticism, but surely historic public art carries with it a presumption of merit and value. Historic public art carries with it added significance as an artistic expression from an earlier era. Any decision to remove or conceal such art bears the heavy burden of overcoming that presumption of merit and significance. Where there is a claim that a historic work of public art is offensive, the duty of its custodian must be make every effort to keep the artwork in place and accessible to view by finding ways of broadening and deepening the understanding of it both historically and intrinsically, and by otherwise addressing the issues and concerns that it has aroused.

The proposal under consideration by the General Services Administration (GSA) to remove or conceal six murals was prompted by complaints that American Indians are portrayed so negatively as to constitute a hostile work environment for Native American employees. A perusal of at least four of the murals in question makes one seek in vain for images that might be regarded as offensive to Indians. In fact, in one mural (Karl Free's) one can imagine that a person of French descent seeing his antecedents portrayed wearing ridiculous bloomers might protest with greater justice than an Indian noting his (or her) ancestors depicted semi-nude with well formed bodies. Regarding one of the William Palmer murals, the apparent assumption of the objectors is that because Indians are

shown attacking a covered wagon occupied by whites the viewer is supposed to conclude that only Indians commit acts of violence. Palmer's companion mural, however, completely demolishes such an assumption as it shows white brigands about to ambush a stagecoach party of whites. One seeks in vain in the Ward Lockwood murals for images or material that conceivably could be deemed seriously offensive.

The more serious complaints have to do with the Frank Mechau mural, "Dangers of the Mail", and with certain of the small-scale scenes at the bottom of it and of its companion mural, "Pony Express Riders". The "Dangers of the Mail" is a massacre scene in which Indians have overcome a stagecoach party: looting is going on; women and men have been killed, some of them stripped of their clothing, and nude white women are about to be scalped. This is a sobering scene in which terrible deeds are shown. The question is: How is it depicted and with what intent?

A full-blown controversy ensued after the commission for "Dangers of the Mail" was granted (but before the full size murals were painted and installed). A two page reproduction of the mural appeared in Time Magazine. The controversy had to do both with female nudity and also with the question of negative stereotyping of Indians. The latter issue was raised quite ably by John Collier, then Commissioner of Indian Affairs. The artist emphasized that, while there was ample precedent in history for such a massacre, the merit of the mural rested not so much on historiography or ethnography as on its artistic rendering of such an event and on its qualities of composition. The mural design survived the controversy and the "Dangers of the Mail" and its companion, "Pony Express Riders" were completed and unveiled as designed without alteration.

It is not surprising that a scene such as that of "Dangers of the Mail" should have been the subject of a mural in a series of murals that was supposed to illustrate the settlement and westward expansion of American society. Surely, the full gamut of relations between white settlers and American Indians would necessarily furnish material for such murals. It is consequently not surprising that a massacre scene such as that of "Dangers of the Mail" should be depicted. The painting presents such a scene not to vilify or glorify this or that race but to portray an instance of deadly confrontation that attended the displacement of Indians and the occupation of their ancestral lands. Along with its companion mural and the small scenes at the base of each, it evokes the drama of the epic and often tragic encounter between the intruding whites and native peoples. The use by the artist of Indian artistic motifs around both paintings along with the names of celebrated Indian chiefs and warriors is a clear indication of the intent of the artist to honor Indian peoples and their cultures. Also important to note is the small scene at the extreme left on the bottom of "Pony Express" entitled "Death on the Prairie". This shows an Indian village with bodies of Indians in the midst of destroyed teepees on a wintry landscape. That scene corresponds to the Sand Creek Massacre in Colorado of Nov. 29, 1864, an atrocity perpetrated upon peaceful Indians by white militiamen with which the Colorado artist was familiar and which he deplored. What is the meaning of this image if not to remind the viewer that whites too committed barbarous acts against Indians? An observer of these murals with open eyes will be moved to consider the monumental

drama of the collision of peoples in the American west and the beauty of the painting is meant to move the viewer to take that larger view.

Should there be no portrayal of such scenes in public art? Should there be no acknowledgement or reminder in our public art of fatal and sometimes savage encounters between peoples? Will the elimination of these murals accomplish anything more than foster an atmosphere in which awareness and discussion of important issues in our history are also eliminated?

Surely there are better ways of responding to concerns about negative images of Indians than by removing or concealing the murals. Various things can be done to address these concerns. For example, the dreary hallways of the Ariel Rios building could be used to exhibit early photographs of Indians such as those by Edward Curtis; stories of the heroic lives of chiefs and warriors whose names are shown on the borders of “Dangers of the Mail” could be made available by video narratives on video machines placed in the vicinity of that painting and in other suitable locations; a rotating exhibit of contemporary Indian art and culture, including things pertinent to the work of the EPA, could be displayed; other displays and video-narratives could tell the story of the New Deal program that gave rise to the Ariel Rios murals as well as information about the present controversy and how it was resolved.